

California Rangeland Conservation Coalition Summit in Sacramento

Central Valley and Foothills cattlemen, conservationists, and state and federal resource agency officials held a historic summit Jan. 11 in Sacramento. The all-day conference was called to develop a broad action plan to implement the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition Resolution, a statement of joint goals reached last year.

“Today we have embarked upon a historic partnership to preserve and enhance California’s working landscapes,” said California Cattlemen’s Association President Mark Nelson. “The California Rangeland Resolution serves as the foundation of an extraordinary partnership between ranchers, environmentalists and governmental agencies ... Our CCA members have a unique standing with respect to the conservation of our state’s rangelands, given that ranchers own and/or manage over 30 million acres in California. Given the sheer volume of property managed by ranchers, and the well-documented preference by imperiled species for these properties, it is clear that meaningful species recovery or conservation efforts require the voluntary cooperation of landowners. Put another way, the protection of our state’s most valuable natural resources is highly dependent on working partnerships between conservation interests and landowners.”

John Hopkins, director of Institute for Ecological Health, said, “The California Rangeland Conservation Coalition is an exciting and important new venture. The conservation organizations that are signatories to the Coalition’s Resolution are very pleased to be working closely with agricultural organizations and a wide array of state and federal agencies in crafting and implementing the important goals of the Resolution.

“Private owned grasslands and oak woodlands around the Central Valley and its surrounding foothills support a stunning variety and abundance of native wildlife and plants. Maintaining the private ranches and their economic viability is essential for the conservation of these critically important natural habitats and their native species.

“This Coalition provides a major opportunity to achieve widespread conservation of rangeland, to aid stewardship and help maintain ranching as a viable way of life. These are steps that are necessary to maintain the many large tracts of grasslands and oak woodlands that are vital to the future of our state’s wildlife. For example, vernal pool grasslands possess a rich array of endangered and threatened animals and plants that are found nowhere else in the world. The grasslands are home to the highest diversity and density of wintering birds of prey in North America. Oak woodlands are essential for hundreds of vertebrate species.”

Hopkins added that, “Two key areas for future action are the 2007 federal Farm Bill and possibilities for additional funds for rangeland conservation in state bond measures.” He said that the CCA and the state Farm Bureau have good relations with members of the House and Senate agriculture committees, while environmentalists have good relations with more urban members of Congress. The

Coalition, putting “teams of cowboys and environmentalists in Congressional and legislative offices is very politically effective, he said. “Jaws can drop.”

Paul Henson, assistant regional director of the California-Nevada US Fish and Wildlife Service office, pledged to add staff to help qualify ranchers for safe harbor agreements. In these agreements, developed in 1999, the Service will issue a permit to ranches to “enhance the propagation or survival” of an endangered or threatened species, once the Service is satisfied that actions undertaken by the landowner produce a “net conservation benefit” to the species.

Bill Chrisman, Director of the state Department of Resources, promised the members of the Coalition that the state would work on ways to streamline environmental regulations to provide certainty in a timely manner, possibly involving changes to the California Environmental Quality Act.

Ryan Broderick, director of the state Department of Fish and Game, told the Coalition that the large blocks of land held by Valley and Foothills ranchers are “the key” to conservation of endangered and threatened species of animals and plants. In response to a question from Dan Macon, director of the Nevada County Land Trust, Broderick agreed that the future will see more public/private partnerships for the effective management of publicly held land. The CDFG now has tenant farming agreements that are both economical and good stewardship of the land. “The Department of Fish and Game does a lot of farming,” Broderick added.

California benefits less relative to its size and the value of its agricultural output from the federal Farm Bill than the Midwestern grain states do, said Michael Bean, attorney and chair of the Wildlife program for Environmental Defense, a national environmental advocacy organization. California ranchers benefit even less. The Coalition of California ranchers and environmentalists working together, presenting a unified voice before Congress, could yield better federal funding for California ranching.

Henson, (USFWS) added that the resource agencies agree that rangelands need to stay in ranching and that they need to help ranchers stay on the land by “removing regulatory disincentives and getting more funding for conservation easements.”

“We have come together as one and must continue to strengthen our bond, CCA President Nelson concluded his address. “We must not let the opportunities presented by this partnership pass us by, and we look forward to transforming the targets defined earlier today into real-world, on-the-ground successes.”

The California Rangeland Conservation Coalition came to life through the following resolution:

The California Rangeland Resolution

The undersigned recognize the critical importance of California’s privately owned rangelands, particularly that significant portion that encircles the Central Valley and includes the adjacent grasslands and oak woodlands, including the Sierra foothills and the interior coast ranges. These lands support important ecosystems and are the foundation for the ranching industry that owns them.

WHEREAS, these rangelands include a rich and varied landscape of grasslands, oak woodlands, vernal pools, riparian areas and wetlands, which support numerous imperiled species, many native plants once common in the Central Valley, and are home to the highest diversity and density of wintering raptors anywhere in North America;

WHEREAS, these rangelands are often located in California's fastest-growing counties and are at significant risk of conversion to development and other uses;

WHEREAS, these rangelands, and the species that rely on these habitats, largely persist today due to the positive and experienced grazing and other land stewardship practices of the ranchers that have owned and managed these lands and are committed to a healthy future for their working landscapes;

WHEREAS, these rangelands are a critical foundation of the economic and social fabric of California's ranching industry and rural communities, and will only continue to provide this important working landscape for California's plants, fish and wildlife if private rangelands remain in ranching;

THEREFORE, we declare that it is our goal to collaboratively work together to protect and enhance the rangeland landscape that encircles California's Central Valley and includes adjacent grasslands and oak woodlands by:

Keeping common species common on private working landscapes;

Working to recover imperiled species and enhancing habitat on rangelands while seeking to minimize regulations on private lands and streamline processes;

Supporting the long-term viability of the ranching industry and its culture by providing economic, social and other incentives and by reducing burdens to proactive stewardship on private ranchlands;

Increasing private, state and federal funding, technical expertise and other assistance to continue and expand the ranching community's beneficial land stewardship practices that benefit sensitive species and are fully compatible with normal ranching practices;

Encouraging voluntary, collaborative and locally-led conservation that has proven to be very effective in maintaining and enhancing working landscapes;

Educating the public about the benefits of grazing and ranching in these rangelands.

Current signers of the California Rangeland Resolution include the following:

Alameda County RCD

California Cattlemen's Association

Alameda County Board of Supervisors

California Resources Agency

American Land Conservancy

California Wildlife Foundation

Central Valley Land Trust Council

Bureau Land Management

Defenders of Wildlife

Butte Environmental Council

Environmental Defense

California Audubon Society

Institute for Ecological Health

California Cattlemen's Association

Natural Resources Conservation Service

California Dept of Fish and Game

San Joaquin Raptor/Wildlife Rescue Center

California Dept of Food and Ag

San Joaquin Valley Conservancy

California Farm Bureau Federation

Sierra Foothills Audubon Society

California Native Grasslands Association

The Nature Conservancy

California Native Plant Society

Trust for Public Land

California Oak Foundation

US Fish and Wildlife Service

California Rangeland Trust

US Forest Service

California Resource Conservation Districts

VernalPools.org

Wildlife Conservation Board